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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 TUNIS 000257

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NEA/IPA, NEA/MAG (LAWRENCE), NEA/PI, DRL, PARIS FOR ZEYA

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TAGS: [PARM](#) [PREL](#) [TS](#)

SUBJECT: AMBASSADOR AND FM DISCUSS PALESTINIAN ELECTIONS,
IRAN, OTHER SUBJECTS

REF: (A) TUNIS 141 (B) STATE 14992 (C) TUNIS 227

Classified By: AMBASSADOR WILLIAM J. HUDSON FOR REASONS 1.4 (B) & (D)

¶1. (C) Summary: In a wide-ranging conversation at the MFA on February 6, Ambassador and Minister Abdelwaheb Abdallah discussed the Palestinian elections and future of the peace process, Iran,s nuclear ambitions, the status of SOFA negotiations, prospects for Maghreb unity, freedom of the press in Tunisia, and the offensive cartoon crisis. On the Palestinian situation, Abdelwaheb promised continued Tunisian support of U.S. policy. Regarding Iran, he said that Tunisian President Ben Ali told Iranian envoy Moussavi (ref tel A) that the GOT,s support for Iran,s right to peaceful exploitation of nuclear power ends when it becomes clear that Iran,s goal is nuclear arms. Abdallah was optimistic on prospects for a U.S.-Tunisia SOFA in the very near future and pessimistic on better intra-Maghreb cooperation. Abdallah thanked the U.S. for its statements on the European cartoon crisis and outlined steps the GOT had taken to mitigate continued violence spawned by Muslim anger. On the issue of freedom of the press in Tunisia, Abdallah claimed clear recent progress and predicted greater opening, but not in a &spectacular or speedy8 way. End Summary.

Israel-Palestine: I wouldn,t want to be in Abbas, place, but it,s a good thing he,s there.

¶2. (C) Responding to the Ambassador,s question on the GOT,s opinion of the Hamas victory, FM Abdallah snorted and said, &You know what we think about a Hamas victory.8 He listened to the Ambassador,s points (ref B) and agreed with all of them. He noted that he was very pessimistic about the situation in the short run, because Hamas did not have good political sense and did not know how to put reason over emotion. While he wouldn,t want to be in Pres. Abbas, place, Abdallah noted that it was a good thing Abbas was there to exert a moderating influence. &What if it was just Hamas?8 he said, &At least Abbas can pressure them to be reasonable.8 Abdallah promised that, as a friend of the Palestinians and the West, Tunisia would do all it could to encourage continued negotiations. &It,s in everybody,s interest to follow the Road Map.8 Abdallah said that he met acting Israeli PM Olmert in Barcelona in the fall, as they were staying in the same hotel and had occasion to talk in the hallways, at meals, and in conference settings. He was impressed: &Olmert speaks well and seems to be a good person to succeed Sharon.8 Abdallah then reversed his original pessimistic prognosis in closing his comments, saying, &I think Hamas will be like the Turks and leave its extremism in the cupboard.8

Iran: GOT,s support for Iran,s peaceful pursuit of nuclear power ends if true pursuit is weapons

13. (C) Shifting the subject to Iran, the Ambassador noted several recent high-level exchanges between Iran and Tunisia and asked what the GOT,s thinking on the Iranian question was. Abdallah replied that he had met U/S Joseph in New York during UNGA and was very appreciative of the briefing he had received on Iran,s nuclear ambitions. That said, Tunisian policy remained the same: The GOT supports the peaceful use of nuclear power but is &completely against8 proliferation of nuclear arms. Abdallah said that Pres. Ben Ali had made clear to visiting Iranian envoy Moussavi that Iran could not count on Tunisia,s support of any attempts to develop nuclear weapons. Abdallah said that Tunisia,s preference remained continued diplomatic pressure on Iran, and that reporting Iran to the UNSC was good as a tool of diplomatic pressure, but not to prepare the way for sanctions. He said, &Our position vis--vis Iran is very clear, and they know it. We meet them frequently in our joint commission and other venues. I am taking a group of Tunisian businessmen to Iran on February 18, for example. We are very clear that we are always against proliferation. Remember our support in bringing Qadhafi to give up weapons.8

Progress on SOFA: Any day now

14. (C) In discussing visit of Secretary of Defense Rumsfeld to Tunisia later this week, Abdallah said that he thought the draft SOFA could be approved by appropriate GOT authorities by then. He said that the process was no longer with his ministry, but that he was optimistic that it might be

TUNIS 00000257 002 OF 003

approved in time for the SecDef visit.

Maghreb cooperation: No encouraging signs

15. (C) Responding to the Ambassador,s question about prospects for greater intra-Maghreb cooperation with the nomination of former Tunisian FM Habib Ben Yahia as the new Secretary-General of the Arab Maghreb Union (UMA), Abdallah

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said that Tunisia was trying to find ways to encourage cooperation, but he was not optimistic. He noted that Tunisia would soon host a Maghreb avian flu meeting and a conference for ministers of finance. Working in "political areas" was very difficult, however, so Tunisia,s approach was to try to bring everyone together in areas where cooperation can work. But the Western Sahara conflict continued to poison the atmosphere and there were &no encouraging signs.8 Abdallah closed by noting that the state of Pres. Bouteflika,s health was not helping, either.

Cartoon crisis: Violence just makes the situation worse

16. (C) Abdallah thanked the Ambassador for the USG,s statements on the issue of the European cartoons that had inflamed the Muslim world. He said that the GOT had directed imams to use their sermons last Friday to urge Tunisians to be moderate and calm on this issue and not to make it a bigger problem than it was. He said that, internationally, the GOT had also called on Muslim states to push for moderation. (Note: We have seen no official GOT statements on this issue. End note.) &There is no point in encouraging conflict or hatred. Violence just makes the situation worse.8

Freedom of the Press in Tunisia: Evolution can,t be "spectacular or speedy"

17. (C) Responding to the Ambassador,s question regarding progress in the GOT,s plan for greater freedom of expression, Abdallah said that he thought the formation of

the new Higher Council for Audiovisual Media was a step in the right direction. He said that the Council was already working on a proposal to liberalize the AV sector, which in turn would have implications for the print media. When the Ambassador asked if this meant the process for registering new media would be more open and transparent soon, Abdallah responded, &I think so, but it will be an evolution that cannot be spectacular or speedy.⁸ He said that Tunisia,s sole private TV, Hannibal, which just celebrated its first anniversary, was obviously more daring in coverage of sports, social subjects, and politics than it had been at first. The same trend could be seen in the Tunisian press. The Ambassador took the opportunity to note that ash Shourouq, Tunisia,s most popular (and vehemently anti-American) daily, still refused to publish or acknowledge the Ambassador,s letters complaining about factual errors in its coverage of U.S.-related issues. Abdallah seemed surprised and said, &Well, you know, the majority of Shourouq,s journalists are pan-Arabs. They are now about 60 per cent pro-Saddam, for example, but they used to be 100 per cent. I,ve told them myself several times that there are more important issues than Falluja to put in bold headlines on the front page.⁸

18. (C) Comment: This is the first time in recent memory that the Ambassador (or any other emboff) has been invited to the MFA for open-ended conversation. All other invitations have been motivated by a specific demarche or message. FM Abdallah repeated three times at the start of the conversation that he had no agenda and merely wanted to follow up on his promise during the Ambassador,s courtesy call that he wanted to meet regularly to discuss issues of bilateral interest. On the multilateral front, nothing Abdallah said was surprising, except his remark that President Ben Ali had directly warned the Iranians that GOT support of Iran,s quest for nuclear power would end if Iran was pursuing nuclear weapons. Abdallah reiterated familiar Tunisian positions on the peace process, Iran, and Maghreb cooperation: Tunisia supports U.S. goals and, while it will not be a hindrance, neither will it be a leader in these areas. On Maghreb integration, it should be noted that since Abdallah,s August 05 move to the MFA, he and former FM Ben Yahia, who was special foreign affairs counselor at the Presidency, have been rivals for status as Tunisia,s primary spokesman on foreign affairs. Most observers believe that Ben Yahia,s move to the Arab Maghreb Union signaled a

TUNIS 00000257 003 OF 003

victory for Abdallah, but the latter was certainly not magnanimous in his appraisal of Ben Yahia,s chances for success in his new position. On local issues, Abdallah,s comments on progress in freedom of the press in Tunisia were notable because of the source (from his former position in the Presidency, Abdallah was the GOT,s chief enforcer of media censorship) and because he did not make the GOT,s usual extravagantly upbeat claims about the media situation in Tunisia. His praise of TV Hannibal for pushing the envelope on media freedom was extraordinary, coming from the man that TV Hannibal,s owner has often told us personally sought to thwart the channel,s start-up and to limit access to programming at every step in his former position. End Comment.

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